



ABRAHAM'S **HOMELAND**

THREE MAIN QUESTIONS arise from a study of Abraham's homeland. Where did he live? When did he live there? When was Abraham born? Some Bible scholars prefer to simply state that the biblical material places the patriarchs in Palestine sometime between 2100 and 1500 B.C.¹ However, strong biblical support dates Abraham's birth to 2166 B.C., assuming a date of 966 B.C. for the fourth year of Solomon's reign.²

The date of Abraham's departure from Ur to Haran is unclear, but it was after he had married Sarah and while he was still under the patriarchal leadership of his father.³ Though not all agree with them, some biblical scholars begin with the 966 B.C. date and count back through age-at-sons'-births and length-of-stays and conclude that Abraham left Haran for Canaan in 2091 B.C. The Scriptures do make it clear that Abraham was 75 years old when he set out for Canaan.⁴ Abraham possibly spent the first 30 to 60 years of his life in Ur.

The Location of Ur

Where was the city of Ur? In Sumerian and Akkadian, the word *Ur* itself means "city." Some have suggested that Ur might have been a city close to Haran, in northwest Mesopotamia. However, the biblical writers were careful to identify Abraham's homeland as being "Ur of the Chaldees," which would have been a Sumerian city near the Euphrates River, presently about 150 miles from the Persian Gulf. In Abraham's lifetime the city may have been where the Euphrates entered the Persian Gulf, with the Gulf having receded since that time. This Sumerian city is the traditional location of Ur, and some archaeologists have stated that Babylonian inscriptions found at the site prove that it was the city of Ur.⁵

The Legacy of Ur

One of the most famous kings of Ur was Ur-Nammu, who established the third dynasty of Ur. His reign was

sometime between 2150 and 2050 B.C. Likely Abraham lived in Ur during the latter portion of Ur-Nammu's reign—or Abraham may have left Ur before Ur-Nammu began to reign. Ur-Nammu is probably best known for his law code, a law code similar to the biblical law code in certain respects.⁶ During Ur-Nammu's kingship, Ur dominated Mesopotamia. Even if Ur-Nammu and Abraham were not contemporaries, what history teaches of Ur-Nammu's reign gives a clear picture of the times in which Abraham lived.

Life in Ur

The average home in Ur was 40 by 52 feet and consisted of 2 levels, for a total of about 4 thousand square feet. The lower level made up the servant and guest quarters while the upper level housed the family. The entire home would have between 10 and 20 rooms.

Education was very extensive at the time of Abraham.

Clay tablets from Ur contain reading,



Left: An electrotype replica of the gold ceremonial helmet of Ur's King Mes-kalam-du.



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LESSON REFERENCE

FBS: Genesis 12:1-20

Above: Stele of Ur-Nammu, the first king of the Third Dynasty of Ur. This stele commemorates

Ur-Nammu's founding a temple of Nannar, the moon god, and Ningal, his consort.

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Left: Abraham's Pool, a religious site in Sanliurfa, eastern Turkey. Arabic tradition holds that

Abraham was born in Sanliurfa.

Above: View of present-day Haran, including

ruins of a medieval fortress in foreground. Beehive shaped huts in the background, which

are still in use today, preserve a building model that may be as ancient as Abraham's time.



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writing, and mathematical exercises. Since Abraham was a member of the upper class, likely he could read and write. Abraham could have easily handed down written records that Moses later used in writing the Pentateuch.

Ur was a center of commerce. All of the important trade routes of the ancient world converged in Ur. Explorers have uncovered bills of lading, invoices, letters of credit, court cases, and even tax records.⁷ Excavations at the royal tombs uncovered some of the most beautiful artifacts from ancient Mesopotamia, including a silver model of a boat, gold vessels for eating or drinking, a woman's headdress, a gold dagger, a gold and mosaic harp, and an inlaid gaming board. Some of these items may have come from an earlier period, but they give testimony to the artisans' craftsmanship at Ur.⁸

Religion in Ur

Before he was called to serve the true God, Abraham was an idolater. Joshua 24:2 records Joshua saying to the people of Israel, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, *namely*, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods'" (NASB). Most likely Abraham worshiped the chief deity of the city, Nanna, (also known as Sin), who had a consort named Ningal who was the moon-goddess. Nanna himself was a god of fertility. Ur-Nammu began a great ziggurat in honor of Nanna. The structure had three levels, and at the top level was a temple for Nanna.⁹ The ziggurat still stands today, due in part to the reconstruction work done by King Nabonidus of Babylon in the sixth century B.C., when it was finally completed.

Evidence of human sacrifice exists in Ur, but its exact relationship, if any, to the worship of Nanna is unclear.¹⁰ The human sacrifices were always related to royalty. A procession of royal attendants, with oxen harnessed to carts, would enter the tomb, perhaps to serve the king or queen in the afterlife. Remains of over 70 attendants were in

Left: From the royal cemetery at Ur, figure of a he-goat standing on its hind legs with its front feet resting on tree branches.

its original twisted gold wire handle and a replica of a bull's head from a harp sounding box.

Lower and bottom left: From the tomb of Queen Pu-abi in royal cemetery at Ur, a boat-shaped gold bowl with

Right: A Muslim memorial built over the cave that tradition identifies as the tomb of Abraham at Machpelah in Hebron.

one mass grave. Sacrifices evidently were voluntary, since there is no sign of struggle or of wounds that others inflicted. Likely those making the sacrifice drank some type of poison, and then others laid out their bodies neatly.¹¹ Those making this ultimate sacrifice likely thought their king was a god or at least the representative of a god on earth, since evidence indicates that the people deified the kings.¹² God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, may not have seemed so strange to Abraham since his homeland took part in human sacrifice.

Abraham left one of the greatest cities of his time, a prosperous and powerful city, to travel to a land God would show Him—but he was really "looking for the city . . . whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10, NASB). **B**

1. Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 113.

2. 1 Kings 6:1-2; Exodus 12:40-41; Genesis 47:9; 25:26; 21:5.

3. Genesis 11:31.

4. Genesis 12:4. See also Provan, Long, and Longman, 113.

5. Jean-CI. Margueron (trans., Stephen Rosoff), "Ur" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 766-767.

6. Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), 104-6.

7. Joseph P. Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, revised and expanded by Howard F. Vos (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 46-47.

8. C. Leonard Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 33-89.

9. Free, 46-47; LaMoine F. DaVries, *Cities of the Biblical World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997), 40.

10. DaVries, 41.

11. Woolley, 58-60.

12. *Ibid.*, 145-46, 53-54.

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